

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 23-0850V

SHARON ENGEL,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: February 18, 2025

Leah VaSahnja Durant, Law Offices of Leah V. Durant, PLLC, Washington, DC, for Petitioner.

Camille Jordan Webster, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On June 8, 2023, Sharon Engel filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, et seq.² (the “Vaccine Act”). Petitioner alleged that she suffered a Table shoulder injury related to vaccine administration as the result of an influenza vaccine received on September 14, 2021. Petition, ECF No. 1. On June 13, 2024, I issued a decision awarding compensation to Petitioner based on the Respondent’s proffer. ECF No. 29.

¹Because this Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2018).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for attorney's fees and costs, requesting an award of \$25,149.02 (representing \$23,963.20 in fees plus \$1,185.82 in costs). Application for Attorneys' Fees and Costs ("Motion") filed October 9, 2024. ECF No. 34. Furthermore, Petitioner filed a signed statement representing that Petitioner incurred no personal out-of-pocket expenses. *Id.* at 2.

Respondent reacted to the motion on October 22, 2024, indicating that he is satisfied the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded to my discretion. Motion at 2-4, ECF No. 35. Petitioner filed a reply requesting an award of fees and costs as indicated in the Motion. ECF No. 36.

I have reviewed the billing records submitted with Petitioner's request and find a reduction in the amount of fees to be awarded appropriate, for the reasons stated below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. See *Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is "well within the special master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. See *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel "should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private

practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission.” *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 434.

ATTORNEY FEES

A. Hourly Rates

The hourly rates requested by attorneys Leah Durant, Christopher Williams, and their associated paralegals are reasonable and consistent with our prior determinations and will therefore be adopted herein. However, the hourly rate requested for Mr. Mateo Forero requires further evaluation.

Petitioner is requesting that I endorse the hourly rate of \$385 for 2024 work performed by Mr. Forero. However, Petitioner did not file an affidavit or any other supporting information to substantiate the proposed hourly rate. Accordingly, I do not endorse the approval of an hourly rate for him at this time. It is incumbent upon Petitioner’s counsel to submit an affidavit in the future to support such requests, including pertinent information such as bar admission dates so the Court can make a proper determination thereto. Accordingly, all time billed by Mr. Forero will be compensated at a non-attorney rate of \$190 per hour. **This results in a reduction of fees in the amount of \$253.00.**³ (In future cases, I will be prepared to award a higher rate once the required substantiation is provided).

B. Billing Reductions

Additionally, a few of the tasks performed by attorneys in this matter are more properly billed using a paralegal rate.⁴ “Tasks that can be completed by a paralegal or a legal assistant should not be billed at an attorney’s rate.” *Riggins v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-382V, 2009 WL 3319818, at *21 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. June 15, 2009). “[T]he rate at which such work is compensated turns not on who ultimately performed the task but instead turns on the nature of the task performed.” *Doe/11 v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. XX-XXXXV, 2010 WL 529425, at *9 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 29, 2010). Although these billing entries are reasonable, they must be charged at a reduced rate comparable to that of a paralegal. **This results in a reduction of fees in the amount of \$206.40.**⁵

³ This amount is calculated as: $(\$385 - \$190 = \$195 \times 1.30 \text{ hrs.}) = \253.00 .

⁴ Entries considered paralegal in nature include drafting and filing basic documents such as an exhibit list, PAR Questionnaire, notice of filing exhibit list, statement of completion, cover sheet, joint notices not to seek review, and filing medical records. See billing entries dated: 7/7/2023 (three entries). ECF No. 34.

⁵ This amount consists of $(\$358 - \$186 = \$172 \times 1.20 \text{ hrs.}) = \206.40 .

Petitioner has otherwise provided supporting documentation for all claimed costs. ECF No. 34-2. Respondent offered no specific objection to the rates or amounts sought. I find the requested costs reasonable and hereby award them in full.

CONCLUSION

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT in part, Petitioner's Motion for attorney's fees and costs. **Petitioner is awarded attorneys' fees and costs in the total amount of \$24,689.62 (representing \$23,503.80 in fees plus \$1,185.82 in costs) to be paid through an ACH deposit to Petitioner's counsel's IOLTA account for prompt disbursement.** In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk of Court shall enter judgment in accordance with this decision.⁶

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran
Brian H. Corcoran
Chief Special Master

⁶ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.